



Montana Fish & Wildlife Commission

MINUTES

Montana Fish and Wildlife Teleconference Commission Meeting

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1420 East 6th Avenue, Helena, MT

November 20, 2014

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**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

Commission Members Present: Dan Vermillion, Chairman, via video
Richard Stuker Vice-Chairman, Matthew Tourtlotte,
Larry Wetsit and Gary Wolfe via telephone

Fish, Wildlife & Parks Staff Present: Jeff Hagener, Director, John Vore, Becky Dockter
and Quentin Kujala

Guests: November 20, 2014 - See Commission file folder for sign-in sheet.

Topics of Discussion:

1. Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance
2. Bighorn Sheep Transplant Areas - Endorsement
3. Public Comment - For Issues Not On This Agenda

1. Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance

Chairman Vermillion called the meeting to order at 9:03 a.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Bighorn Sheep Transplant Areas - Endorsement

Vice-Chairman Stuker stated he received calls requesting more tags and to keep sheep in-state.

Chairman Vermillion stated he has received calls stating the same thing.

Commissioner Tourtlotte stated he received a letter from Jim Weatherly explaining why the sheep need to be sent out-of-state and correspondence asking for more tags and to keep the sheep in-state.

Director Hagener explained the purpose and reasoning for the teleconference meeting.

John Vore, Game Management Bureau Chief explained during the October and November meetings, the Commission approved FWP to move up to 50 bighorn sheep from Hunting District (HD) 482 with the option of capturing less than 10 sheep in HD 680 if necessary to complete a capture goal; it was not agreed upon as to where to put them. FWP continues to look for areas to establish a new sheep herd but is repeatedly foiled by inadequate habitat, lack of adequate public access for hunting, the proximity of domestic sheep and/or goats, and the threat of establishing a disease vector to a healthy herd in the event of an outbreak; there are no suitable places to establish a new population within Montana. Even if such a place were identified this year, the necessary groundwork of habitat analysis, landowner contacts, the Environmental Analysis (EA) have not been done. Current Commission policy disallows sending sheep out-of-state. Augmentation can be an important bighorn management tool, but currently there are no herds in-state where a transplant of additional sheep is biologically desirable; some herds have experienced a recent die-off and have been mentioned as possible candidates. Bringing sheep from another area, regardless of genetic similarities, will risk not only to the suppressed herd the potential for new and/or different pathogens or strains of pathogens, but also a risk for the transplanted sheep because of ongoing problems with poor lamb recruitment and disease transmission from the receiving herd. FWP has had experience with several herds in the state (Kootenai Falls, Berray Mountain, the Highlands, and the Beartooth WMA), where repeated transplants of additional sheep have not benefitted the herd; need to be careful in placing sheep somewhere in the state just because we feel like we have to. In these types of circumstances, FWP believes moving sheep out-of-state as the best option; it eliminates the overpopulation problem in the donor herd; can be an overall benefit to bighorns in North America by helping another state; does not compromise another existing herd in Montana, and saves money; the receiving state pays for the capture, testing, handling and transport of the sheep. The money Montana

saves can be put to use in-state for searching for and evaluating potential transplant options, habitat acquisition or improvement, survey and inventory, research, or any number of other beneficial projects.

Vice-Chairman Stuker stated he does not want the sheep shipped out-of-state but doesn't want them to be put in an area where there will be a die-off.

Chairman Vermillion stated with consultation of area biologists and discretion of the Department breaking up the herds, he is going to make a motion to augment sheep to HD 380 Maiden Rock (southwest side of the Highlands) and HD 455, (outskirts of the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area (WMA)); this would take care of the 50 sheep the Department believes need to be removed from HD 482 and HD 680 and augment them all in-state.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked when the last die-offs were in these areas.

Chairman Vermillion stated the major die-off in HD 380 was in 1995.

Vore stated seven transplants have been done in HD 380 with insignificant disease die-off in 2008, concern of introducing other strains of pathogens and other types of toxins beings exposed; six transplants have been done HD 455 with the most recent in 2011, with a die-off in the last eight years.

Vice-Chairman Stuker and Vore had an extensive discussion on past augmentations and die-offs.

Commissioner Wolfe commented he would like to see more bighorn sheep populations in the state, but as a wildlife biologist that has followed the challenges of managing bighorn sheep throughout the west; important to defer to the professional biologist on their recommendation.

Commissioner Tourtlotte stated the Commission is in a difficult position; policy states herds will be established within the state; public overwhelmingly wants the sheep to stay in state; reluctant to send sheep out of state; does not know the situation in South Dakota; Department should reevaluate the plan.

Vore stated South Dakota is looking at reintroducing new populations in the Black Hills on predominantly Forest Service public land.

Commissioner Tourtlotte asked what would have to be done to increase the opportunity in areas like HD 482 to avoid situations where there are too many sheep; large numbers of hunters have a tough time getting an opportunity to hunt bighorn sheep; need to look at other hunting opportunities.

Vore stated the desirable tags for hunters are ram tags; ewe tags are used for population control purposes; hunting opportunities are challenging and there are private land issues.

Action: Chairman Vermillion moved and Commissioner Tourtlotte seconded the motion that the Commission authorize the Department to move sheep from HD 482 and HD 680 to the Maiden Rock area HD 340 and Beartooth area HD 455 as it sees fit to minimize any disease risk that is arising in HD 482 or HD 680.

Allen Schallenberger, Sheridan, need to quit saying can't and figure a way to transfer the sheep.

Glenn Hockett, Gallatin Wildlife Association (GWA), little discussion on low density herds around the state; disagree there is no place to transplant within state; upset with the idea hunters will not walk in to hunt.

Jim Weatherly, Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF), priority is for sheep being removed from HD 482; over objective; will condemn sheep in HD 455; HD 340 is a viable possibility and preferred site.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked why there are no sheep in the Black Hills area.

Vore stated Black Hills was historic for bighorn sheep but died-off in the 1930s.

Chairman Vermillion stated in a South Dakota newspaper it states the regional biologist explained the Black Hills bighorn sheep numbers have dramatically declined since 2005. The most recent die-off that occurred in HD 340 was not caused by domestic sheep; there are always risks wherever sheep are transferred. The Commission is the policy making body for the Department; the Commission has been uniformed in finding places to transplant sheep within the state; the Commission has made it clear to make this a priority; need to get the science done. The Department can figure out how to split the herd up and where to transfer. Appreciates Vice-Chairman Stuker and Commissioners' Tourtlotte and Wolfe deferring last week's vote.

Commissioner Tourtlotte stated it is clear the public is overwhelmingly stating they have a higher tolerance for the risk associated with keeping the sheep in state; part of the Commission's job is to hear what the public is saying and bring it back to the Department; the policy needs to match with what the public is saying they want.

Vore explained current and long term research.

Vice-Chairman Stuker and Vore discussed the Department's and MSU's research on current herds and South Dakota's intent and past dealings with bighorn sheep.

Vice-Chairman Stuker stated he wants the Commission to receive updates as things move forward.

Chairman Vermillion stated the Commission has given the authority to the Department to remove the sheep as they see fit to remove from HD 482 and HD 680 to address the disease concern that the Department perceives to exist in that particular sheep herd. The Department needs to look at season structure changes in HD 482 and HD 680 for next season, possibly at the December meeting; would help alleviate any potential disease risk.

Vice-Chairman Stuker would like to discuss the possibility of selling two tags at a future meeting.

Director Hagener stated the statute restricts the Department to one tag for each species; needs to go through legislative process; several sportsmen groups do not like having just one tag.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked the Department to get the analysis to see if this is something that should be looked at in the future.

Commissioner Wetsit asked if there is a Commission policy that disallows sending sheep out-of-state; need to keep sheep in Montana but also have to maintain and protect the survivability of the sheep.

Director Hagener stated there is not an official written policy; since approximately 2005 the Commission has upheld that no sheep will be sent out-of-state for any augmentations or transplants.

Commissioner Wetsit stated the Department and Commission need to adopt a sheep policy; based on no policy, will support the current motion.

Chairman Vermillion stated the Commission is not saying how many sheep need to be moved to HD 340 or HD 455, just that is where the Commission would like to see the sheep from HD 482 and HD 680 be moved to, and to continue the policy the Commission has had since 2005, to not move sheep out-of-state at this time.

Action on Motion: Motion Passed 4-1.

Chairman Vermillion, Vice-Chairman Stuker, Commissioner's Tourtlotte and Wetsit – aye
Commissioner Wolfe – nay

3. Public Comment – For Issues Not On This Agenda

Action: Commissioner Stuker moved and Commissioner Tourtlotte seconded the motion to adjourn the meeting. Motion Passed.

The meeting adjourned at 10:12 a.m.



Dan Vermillion, Chairman

M. Jeff Hagener, Director

